

Your Affectionate Son in St Dominic Eric Gill T.S.D.

Thus did Eric Gill sign his letters to Bede Jarrett, the English Dominican Provincial between the wars. I hope to show that he was saying something true about himself.

But it is presumptuous of me to write about him, and especially here in *New Blackfriars*, which is a development of the *Blackfriars* in which he first published so many of his essays. *Blackfriars* has also given us many personal witnesses to Eric Gill's character and shape of mind – David Jones, John O'Connor, Walter Shewring, Desmond Chute and a number of others. So there is an element of the absurd in my appearing here. I have tried to get rid of the absurdity in so far as I am able by assembling some of the available evidence about Mr Gill, and especially of course from his *Autobiography*.

Since the publication last November of Dr Yorke's book, the name of Gill has frequently appeared in all sorts of places. There have been several exhibitions of his work. There has been a sale at Sothebys. He has become someone talked about in the art world. I wonder what E. G. would have thought about that. When I read some of the reviews of *Eric Gill, Man of Flesh and Spirit* I wondered whether the Gill they portrayed was in fact recognisably the same as the Gill described by those who knew him, or indeed as Dr Yorke recognised him.

The Times reviewer wrote that 'it is certainly true that the literature relating to Gill has up to now been mainly superior hagiography. And Gill's confrères have most noticeably played down the eroticism' (3 December 1981). 'Superior hagiography' – isn't there a tang of the dismissive there? Gill himself wrote that 'Our irreligious commercialism had destroyed the religious basis of society and made all ritual and mythology and hagiography seem ridiculous' (*Autobiography*, p 163). As for his confrères playing down the eroticism, I wonder myself whether the reviews haven't shown what happens when it is played up, a travesty I think of Gill's reverence for the human body. And who, I wonder, are these confrères? 'He still incurs the scandal of the Pharisees' wrote John O'Connor in 1943 (*Blackfriars*, February 1943). Most of us find it difficult to avoid puritanism or pharisaism. How Gill himself grew to detest both. For him, even though sometimes it may have run away with him, sex was something holy, sacramental.

He would have been greatly amazed at the suggestion that he was himself holy, but those who knew him, and some still alive, have given that evidence. The priest who attended him at his death declared that 'I have never, in my 45 years as a priest, seen a more beautiful death. I really felt that I was in the presence of a saint'. The impact lasted; he wrote more than 20 years after Gill's death.

We need to be careful about the meaning of such words as holy, sex, eroticism; and what is pornography? We find it hard not to be shocked that Gill delighted in sculpting and drawing phal-luses, objects not mentioned in polite society. We are still Victorians, who cannot understand how there was, Gill believed, a deli-cious holiness in this particular example of God's handicraft.

Eric Gill was born into a nonconformist family. His father was an ill-paid curate in the Countess of Huntingdon's 'Connection'; he later joined the Church of England and remained poor but very respectable. The care and innocent snobbery of the Gill parents – E. G.'s own description – prevented their children from ever hav-ing 'undesirable' companions. 'It is difficult if not impossible for ordinary vulgar men and women – there is no sin in vulgarity and who would wish everyone to be "refined" – to throw off, either sud-denly or after a long time, the deeply ingrained habits of thought instilled into them by their parents and nurses and the whole world around them' (*Autobiography*, p 50).

Gill himself was brought up to believe that sex is a matter of sec-recy, 'something to be approached with fear, fear almost amount-ing to panic'. He didn't think that his experience was in any way remarkable or extra-ordinary.

Yet he remained an innocent (and what do we mean by that word, I wonder). He also met Ananda Coomaraswamy. 'I mean: what's wrong with a naked girl that you shouldn't look at a photo-graph of one? What's wrong with sexual intercourse that a picture of it should be considered damnable? You deceive yourself, I used to say to myself – you're just pretending; you only want such things to gloat on them. No, but honestly, I used to reply to my-self, it's true, it's true, it's true – those things *are* good things and suppose I am gloating – well, what's wrong with gloating if it comes to that? Can't I do a bit of gloating without going to the devil?' (*ibid.* p 97). Left alone with his questions, in a world almost en-tirely devoid of moral certainties, the young man of 20 'managed to keep a sort of balance on the tight-rope of life'.

'There's always a good many sides to a question and, for ex-ample (and it's the kind of example which typifies a lot of other things), even pornographic photographs are generally photographs of things very good in themselves' (*ibid.* p 97).

Gill as a very young man had gone to Edward Johnston's class in writing and lettering. It was through him that he 'finally threw off the art nonsense of the Chichester art school' (*ibid.* p 118). He believed that Johnston was one of the principal influences in his life. 'Just as "art nonsense" couldn't stand against him, so also "thought nonsense" was toppled over. He was a man miraculously deliberate of speech and equally deliberate in thought, and I was just the opposite. . . . The first time I saw him writing, and saw the

writing that came as he wrote, I had that thrill and tremble of the heart which otherwise I can only remember having had when first I touched her body, or when I first heard the plain-chant of the Church (. . . in the Abbey of Mont César) or when I first entered the Church of San Clemente in Rome, or first saw the North Transept of Chartres from the little alley between the houses. Many other things, a million, million other things are equally good. I am only saying that these are, for me, the things that stand out. On those occasions I was caught unprepared. I did not know such beauties could exist. I was struck as by lightning, as by a sort of enlightenment. There are indeed many other things as good; there are many occasions when, in a manner of speaking, you seem to pierce the cloud of unknowing and for a brief second seem to know even as God knows – sometimes, when you are drawing the human body, even the turn of a shoulder, or the firmness of the waist, it seems to shine with the radiance of righteousness. But these more sudden enlightenments are rare events, never forgotten, never overlaid. On that evening I was rapt. It was no mere dexterity that transported me, it was as though a secret of heaven were being revealed' (*ibid.* p 119).

E. G. therefore left his architect's office to become a letter-cutter and a monumental mason – 'it was in effect to cease to be a gentleman', a big comedown in the view of his parents and friends.

In 1904 Eric and Mary 'entered the enchanted garden of Christian marriage' (*ibid.* p 131). After his marriage he thought of himself 'as God's darling', especially 'in his choice of my wife'. How significant is his use of pronouns! David Jones lived *en famille* with the Gills at Ditchling and at Capel-y-ffin, and was for a time engaged to be married to one of the Gill's daughters. Somewhere, but exasperatingly I cannot at the moment find the actual text, David Jones wrote that the principal witnesses to the sort of man Gill was, and as a husband and a father, were his wife and daughters; for them he was someone very special, the object of their love and reverence. 'I cannot forget the dream in which I was walking in heaven (you can't help your dreams) with Mary and the children. We came upon our Lord . . . And I said to him, "This is Betty . . . and this is Petra . . . and this is Joanna . . . and this is Gordian . . ." And he shook hands with them all. And then I said: "And this is Mary". And he said, "Oh, Mary and I are old friends". It was a green open hillside with paths and bushes and a blowy sort of sky with Downland clouds' (*ibid.* pp 208-9).

About seven years after their marriage he 'seriously began to consider the practical steps which were necessary if you contemplated joining the Church. In my own mind I was a Roman Catholic already' (*ibid.* p 182). Somehow this was all bound up with his

development as a stone-carver — ‘Religion was not only the world’s first need, but *my* first need. The letter-cutter might procrastinate; the sculptor couldn’t afford to’ (*ibid.* p 165).

So, as he put it, he invented his own religion. ‘I can’t recall the tenets of this “new religion”, nor is it important to do so now. What interested and excited me in those years was the discovery, a very slow and gradual discovery, that the religion I was inventing was really Roman Catholicism. Though I did not think so to start with. In fact I thought I was doing quite the opposite. I thought the Christianity of the churches was dead and finished, and surely one can be forgiven for thinking so. The effects of Christianity in the world seemed non-existent, and I knew of Roman Catholicism only by repute. I did not know any Roman Catholics and I hardly ever went into any Roman Catholic churches or even read Roman Catholic books, moreover what little I knew of Roman Catholicism from outward appearances was, in a general way, revolting. The point was this: I had arrived at the general position that the first need, my first need, and the world’s first need was religion — “for only he (as I was very fond of quoting from Nietzsche, whose *Zarathustra* was one of my most cherished books) ‘who knoweth whither he saileth, knoweth which is fair wind and which is a foul wind’”. And religion means rule, and therefore God-rule. . . . In so far as the Catholic religion were catholic it must be true! The Catholic Church professed to rule the whole world in the name of God. . . . That was the thing that caused me to reconsider my judgment as to the Church’s vitality. Of course if the Catholic Church were simply an arrogant upstart institution, with no roots and no history and, more important to the innocent person, no fruits by which you might know her — no good fruits, nourishing and delectable — then there would obviously be no point in considering her. But this was clearly not so; there was fruit in plenty, and, in my mind very good fruit, even though they seemed to be fruits of the past’ (*ibid.* p 168-9).

Gill approached a certain eminent Catholic of his acquaintance. He asked him for information about the Roman Catholic Church. ‘In his enthusiasm to rope me in, as it seems to me now, he grossly deceived me. He agreed with my views about life and work, probably quite genuinely, but he hid from me what a more scrupulous person would have thought it was his duty to reveal — that the catholics of today are almost completely corrupted by the world they live in and that, though it is certainly true that “big business” and the industrial exploitation of the working people are not typically fruits of catholicism, quite the contrary, nevertheless, very few catholics are aware of this and most of them are as enthusiastic about the triumphs of industrialism and the British Empire and

money as anyone else. So I was misinformed and deceived. But I do not think any harm was done. I was misinformed as to the quality of mind of catholics today, but I was not misinformed as to the main truth. Catholicism was what I supposed, even though neither the catholic clergy nor laity were all that my informant would have me think. I was misinformed but not misled' (*ibid.* p 169).

However, his informant 'had the great wisdom, when I asked him to introduce me to a priest with whom I could discuss my case, not to send me to some notably cultured person who might have been supposed to understand "art", but to the parish priest of Ely Place, and thus the first priest I ever spoke to as a father in God was, like one of the disciples, a simple fisherman, and I a child and a nobody' (*ibid.* p 169-70).

So Gill invented, that is to say, he found or uncovered, the Roman Catholic Church. It seemed to be 'a perfectly human institution, matter and spirit, and the primacy is of the spirit, therefore guided by the Holy Ghost, therefore the bride of Christ, therefore a divine institution also' (*ibid.* p 190). For some months he tried to be a rationalist enquirer. He read all sorts of books and found some of them exciting; he only remembered the title of one of them, *Orthodoxy*, by G. K. Chesterton, with whom he had felt at one time quite out of tune. 'But as the years passed I got past that and came to revere and love him, as a writer and as a holy man, beyond all his contemporaries. Thanks be to God he also loved and befriended me' (*ibid.* p 190). For a time his approach to the Church was 'a breathless sort of mountain climbing business'. But he decided that this wasn't the way – there would always be a new ridge to climb, another book to read. 'I saw that this mountain was not an earthly one from the top of which I could survey all the kingdoms of the world. I don't think I can claim to have prayed, still less to have fasted. I just asked to be received. This sounds impossibly pious and childlike. Perhaps it was really simple impudence. . . . I made up my mind to confine my attention to things that seemed fundamentally important and things that intimately concerned me.' And these important matters were – and let us say are – that 'the bride is in love with her husband and his Bride is in love with Christ. I am a member of that mystical body and share her ecstasy' (*ibid.* p 191-92).

The remaining 27 years of Gill's life were seen as he, a dying man, wrote about them as just a postscript to that momentous happening after which he and his family 'lived happily ever after'.

One of the consequences of their becoming R C was the discovery of the Dominican Order. According to one account it seemed to have happened through Desmond Chute, who had been

at Downside as a boy, knew Fr Vincent McNabb, and introduced him to the Peplers and Gills. (Gill had some years before met Vincent McNabb in the house of Andre Raffalovich in Edinburgh.) It is not for us to blow this particular trumpet – suffice to say that Eric Gill became, and remains, one of the most notable characters among English Dominicans of the first half of this century. Gill himself believed that his life was entirely altered through his relationship with the Order. Not only Ditchling and the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic and all that followed, but now he had found a harbour for his mind. ‘My life had henceforth an anchorage, and not an anchorage only but a port from which to sail and to which to return. The Church itself, Christ himself, is such an anchorage and such a port, but the greater includes the less’ (*ibid.* p 313-14).

In 1921 Father Austin Barker, a Dominican at Hawkesyard, whose influence on Ditchling and on Gill particularly is perhaps not now given its value, wrote to ‘My dear Eric, Thomas [Shove], Hilary [Pepler], and Desmond [Chute] about the meaning of Ditchling: ‘Do let me remind you all, and urge you, concerning the central thing you are about, and the real purpose of your community. Friction of opinion and even of judgment you will, and must have – and in its true place it is all to the good: indeed for us Dominicans it is a large part of our community life. But the Central Thing that we and you are about, is no mere economic protest, no mere artistic protest; it is not merely an effort towards social justice, or distributed responsibility, or agricultural redemption; though all this comes into it. But your work – as far as I see it and love it, is essentially a Religious protest, an active claim that the contemplative life, or constant and concrete Praise of God, is the normal life brought into the world by the Incarnation. This is primary – and nothing else is primary’ . . . and five more closely written pages.

Twenty-six years later Conrad Pepler wrote: ‘I was not amazed to come across a Carmelite Convent that had read Gill with understanding and enthusiasm, for the only integral life is the contemplative life and Gill was a contemplative by disposition and design’ (*Blackfriars*, May 1947, p 209).

There is an almost total difference of judgment about Gill, and surely God is deeply involved. Douglas Cleverdon, who knew him and his family, and who incidentally won’t mind if I say he is not an R C, has recently written how the concept of ‘Christ’s love for His bride, the Church . . . underlay practically all his erotic engraving. However explicit, they are not pornographic. Indeed, to some people they appear rather cold. But their beauty is evident’ (*Eric Gill 1882 – 1940*, Blond Fine Art, 1982).

On the other hand, their art critic has written in one of the glossy monthlies that 'so dominant in Gill's work did the pornographic element become' that his friends (and he is referring to before the 1914 war) thought it might damage his reputation; he is dismissed as absurd, a ranter, a wretched sculptor, though admittedly a very fine draughtsman of a certain sort, one whose work, it seems, deserves no more respect than an Art Deco teapot. In the same number there are two pages, with photographs, about someone who 'has been hailed as the best woman's body in the world'.

However, as part of the recent celebration of Gill's centenary at Spode House there was an exhibition of his work. Here was one of the drawings that were published, severely reduced in size, in *Drawings from Life* – no. 28 I think. He drew these a year or two before he died. It enthralled me as something of exquisite beauty, a convincing answer to the conundrum of his sexuality, a wonderful evocation of God's creative love, a raising of the mind and heart to God.

Bede Bailey O P

Eric Gill and Workers' Control

Adrian Cunningham

*'... all decent people are ultimately anarchists –
certainly all Christians must be.'*

[Letter to Stanley Morrison 16.9. 36]

The importance of Gill's political writings lies in their linking of two major traditions of response to industrial capitalism, that of libertarian socialism and that of catholicism. In the line of Morris and Kropotkin he is a significant figure; in the history of modern English catholicism, a major one.

Industrialism in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe can be seen as consisting of two basic phases. In the first industrial revolution there was a breaking of the traditional *vertical* links between social strata and a tendency for them to polarise into self-consciously opposed classes. In the second wave of the industrial revolution the *horizontal* links of family, workplace and voluntary association which had survived are weakened or broken. A basic strand of socialist thought was preoccupied with the first development. It tended to welcome the polarization of social classes and